

Stefanko explains delay in new telecommunications system

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LAKE COUNTY - It had been anticipated the new telecommunications system would be operational by January this year, but some issues have caused delays.

One problem was that the new antennas received were wrong. That was not discovered until they were installed and departments called about communications problems.

"I called the one company and told them I wanted a specific antenna; this antenna was recommended by Motorola and by the state of Ohio," said Paul Stefanko, director of the Lake County Telecommunications Department. "I gave them the model number Motorola gave me and they gave me their part number for that."

Once the price was settled on, the vendor provided a quote using their part number and the model number with a different suffix, but which appeared to be correct for the antenna. Everything seemed to be in order so, when the 22 antennas arrived, the county called in the company it was using and began installation.

Asked if the purchase order would not have had full information, he said the description on some items, like the antennas, are so lengthy, only part numbers are

used. He admitted it increased the possibility of errors.

"As soon as they were done putting antennas up, I began getting complaints," Stefanko said. "The coverage was not what it should have been."

He called the vendor and found the part number he was given was not the correct one for the model number he provided. Unfortunately, the antennas are not available off the shelf but are custom made, so it takes six weeks for delivery.

Four of the correct antennas were immediately available and they were installed.

The rest of the wrong ones were taken down and the old ones put back up.

The vendor was cooperating with the county to take care of the error. The new antennas were to arrive about the second week of May.

However, the issue which really caused the delay was the need to have all the radios programmed.

"We are working with all of the police chiefs and all of the fire chiefs to get their requests for how they want their radios programmed," Stefanko said. "I made that request about five weeks ago and today (April 3), I'm still waiting on Grand River Fire's."

He said he advised the chiefs,

since there would be 3,000 radios to do, that the chiefs agree on settings. Now they are working on the language needed to do the programming.

Another complication is that the system is not just being used by Lake County. It will also have the state of Ohio, Cuyahoga and Geauga counties' radios in the systems. That adds up to about 400 different departments and agencies all on the new communications system.

Plus, programming could not start until all radios were received by the departments. Grand River had just ordered their radios the beginning of April.

He believed the delay was caused by financial issues. Some other departments had also delayed their purchase of radios for financial or other reasons.

"That's what we're in the process of doing; organizing this multi-system, statewide communications system, and making sure that it's not just functional, but that it's usable by the users and easy to use," Stefanko said. "It's a terrific system, but if we make it so complicated to use, we're going to lose the benefit of it."

Due to the number of radios on the system, the county cannot make any mistakes in programming, he said.

The school districts are all on the system. Willoughby-Eastlake and Mentor just came on in the past week or so.

Since the school radios do not normally communicate with police and fire departments, they were able to be put online sooner.

The delays caused some concern and discussion at the Madison Village Council meeting April 2.

Madison Village Police Chief Dawn Shannon told council the chiefs were advised there were some problems in the western part of the district and antennas were being replaced.

"You may see officers with cell phones," Shannon said. "We started marking again. We were getting artifacts Friday. That's where we're at."

During a later interview she clarified that some of the issues her department was having had occurred some months back, but there were also some recent ones, not related to the wrong antennas the county received.

DELAY

"The county has caused an absolute officer and firefighter safety issue. Police departments and fire agencies have had to change their operations in order to accommodate degraded communications," said Councilman John Hamercheck. "Several agencies are incapable of entering buildings with their communications at this time. They have to relay communications from interior to exterior and back to their dispatch facilities."

Some other chiefs were

contacted for comments about the system issues.

"We had some intermittent issues with radio communications and I'm sure the police departments in the county did," said Willoughby Fire Chief Al Zwegat. "We had difficulties radioing out of buildings, gaps in coverage, stuff of that nature."

He said his department "worked around" the issues, which were a concern.

"It's a pretty big project. Nobody likes to have an unforeseen issue crop up;

when they do you address it," Zwegat said. "Mr. Stefanko has been attentive to our needs and we've been trying to work through them."

Eastlake Police Chief Larry Reik said most of his department's issues were in the station.

"They got the problem figured out, I thought, in a pretty reasonable amount of time," he said. "Anytime you get intermittent or loss of radio traffic it could be a safety concern and it could be a potential problem. For-

tunately we didn't have any cases where anyone got hurt or anyone went without help for any period of time. The officers, just by nature, made accommodations through exchanging of cell phone numbers with dispatch and double and triple checking, making sure everyone knows where person A is at and person B is at."

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